



Conference

The Wartime Election of 2004

January 13-14, 2006

9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The Mershon Center for International Security Studies
The Ohio State University
1501 Neil Avenue
Columbus, OH 43210

Scholars from around the country convened on the Mershon Center to discuss the "War on Terror" and the US presidential election of 2004 that took place amidst the "war on terror." What made this election so unique is the high level of polarization that existed among the US electorate and the unusual circumstances of war and partisan conflict that accompanied it.

Scholars examined the dynamics of elections nationwide as well as in the state of Ohio. As Ohio was one of the pivotal states—and was said to have determined the outcome of the elections—great attention has been paid to how and according to which issues the state electorate cast its votes between the two principal candidates, President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry.

While incumbents running for reelection typically have an advantage over their opponents, the election of 2004 did not give President Bush a landslide victory: this race was once of the closest in history, much like the election of 2000.

Scholars examined the issues and factors voters considered the factors which figured prominently in their final voting choice. Most prominent among these issues were the war on terror, war in Iraq, the state of the economy, and last but not least, gay marriage.

Conference participants differed in their evaluation of which issue helped or hurt President Bush in his election campaign. However, there was general agreement that national security concerns and the desire to support the administration during a war prevailed in the end. The war in Iraq created credibility and competence problems for the administration and even though voters' evaluation of its conduct in the war on terror could have thus suffered, the ongoing concern with terrorist attacks seems to have benefited the Bush campaign in the end. Put differently, many voters decided to go along with the certainty of a commander-in-chief they knew and not for change, which was perceived as risky. For this reason, Democrats tried to focus the debate on the state of the economy during the campaign, while the Republicans tried to steer discussion to national security matters.

Conference participants also looked closely at how significant a role moral values played in the election. They agreed that moral values are indeed important for some voters; however, voters did not prioritize a candidate's values to the extent that one could describe the election as a "culture war" between traditionalist conservatives and liberals, as is popularly believed. Ideology played only a limited role in deciding outcome.

Nonetheless, gay marriage was clearly one salient issue of the election campaign. Referenda on gay marriage ban were conducted in a number of states across the country simultaneously with the presidential election and the definition of marriage was part of the greater debate on moral values. However, contrary to popular perception, these referenda seem to have mobilized as much as created a backlash against Republicans in the election. Evangelical Christians might have been tempted to participate in greater numbers, but secular Republicans were largely alienated by these proposals. In addition, those who claimed to have participated in the election primarily to vote in favor of statewide bans on gay marriage.

In Ohio, the dramatic feature of the election was the surge in turnout and the correlation between the density of churches and support for the gay marriage ban in a given region. What was not unusual was that President Bush narrowly won in Ohio because he got the support of the typically-conservative Appalachian counties, which have historically decided the outcome in the state.

In the end, Bush may be said to have won reelection due to certain personality traits voters valued, such as decisiveness and clarity, and the ability of his team to continually reshape conversation to focus on national security. President Bush was seen as a decisive leader, with a clear position his supporters and opponents knew. On the other hand, Senator Kerry failed to

present a clear, concise position. Although he was seen as more intelligent and more concerned with the economic conditions of the average person, his seemingly shifting views and his effort to appeal to more than his traditional base of support hurt his chances.

The 2004 election established that there was a very high level of polarization between the Democratic and Republican-leaning voters. This was due in part due to the actions of the Bush administration, as President Bush acted more as a "divider" than a "uniter." However, the level of polarization among the American electorate has been rising for the last few decades, and the election simply brought out simmering tensions.

Another observable trend is that the traditional Democratic plurality over the has been shrinking among voters. What remains to be seen is whether this is due to rise in conservative religiosity levels among the national population or whether the issue areas such as international involvement/national security, topics in which Republicans are typically seen as more competent than Democrats, have recently come to the fore.

Reported by Sinan Hastorun. Click [here](#) for more information.